



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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CHHS SECRETARY ISSUES STATEMENT ON AVAILABILITY OF MERCURY-FREE FLU VACCINE

S. KIMBERLY BELSHÉ
SECRETARY

SACRAMENTO – Kim Belshé, secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency, today issued the following statement regarding her decision to issue an exemption allowing the use of influenza vaccine containing mercury for children under age 3 for up to six weeks. Pursuant to AB 2943 (Chapter 837, Statutes of 2004), the Legislature allowed for an exemption to the law so parents have options for vaccination during times of short supply, if desired.

"The Administration is committed to implementing AB 2943 and ensuring that pregnant women and children have access to mercury-free vaccines. However, the health threat that seasonal influenza presents is severe and all too often deadly. Given the real constraints on availability of mercury-free seasonal flu vaccine, we feel it is important to offer this short-term alternative to parents and health care providers in order to ensure young children are protected from the potentially severe effects of the flu.

"California is experiencing a temporary shortage of mercury-free flu vaccine because the only manufacturer of the vaccine in a formulation that meets California's new mercury standard for children under age 3 has a delay in shipment. We anticipate sufficient mercury-free vaccines will be available within six weeks; however, while waiting for this supply, we could lose the opportunity to vaccinate young children.

"The American Academy of Pediatrics, California Medical Association, California Academy of Family Physicians and Kaiser Permanente have all called for this exemption because the delay in supply is creating a dangerous situation for our youngest children. Further, these groups, representing physicians who care for children, have well-founded concerns that some parents do not have the option to delay vaccination because of personal barriers, like access to transportation.

"Each year, approximately 36,000 people in the United States die from influenza and its complications and at least 200,000 are hospitalized. During the 2004 flu season, more than 150 children in the U.S. died from influenza and many more were hospitalized as a result of complications. No other vaccine-preventable disease kills more people in this country.

"We take very seriously the expressed concerns that mercury in vaccines causes autism and remain committed to full implementation of AB 2943. The manufacturers are also taking this concern seriously and are building new production plants to process mercury-free vaccines. As we move into the flu season, given that the risks of influenza exceed risk from mercury in this vaccine, I am exercising my authority to temporarily exempt the influenza vaccine for children under age 3 from the provisions of AB 2943 for a maximum six-week period. This action is based upon a temporary shortage of mercury-free influenza vaccine and the public health necessity of continuing to allow young children to receive this vaccine. The Governor concurs with my exemption determination.

"We encourage health care professionals to first use any available mercury-free vaccine during this exemption period. We urge those providers offering vaccines containing mercury to discuss options with parents before administering the vaccine.

"I strongly urge parents to consult with their health care providers about vaccinating their children against influenza. October through December is the best time to get vaccinated because the annual flu season usually peaks in January or February."

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Statement on Mercury-Free Flu Vaccine Exemption

Rick Rollens

Parent

Co-Founder, U. C. Davis M.I.N.D. (Medical Investigation of Neurodevelopmental Disorders) Institute

Founding Member, FEAT (Families for Early Autism Treatment)

Member, Legislative Blue Ribbon Commission on Autism

As the parent of a child who suffers from regressive autism, and a leader in the autism community who has fought tenaciously to remove mercury and other toxic materials from vaccines; I support Governor Schwarzenegger's decision to grant a time limited exemption to California's mercury free vaccine law.

Upon review of the request by the American Academy of Pediatrics and others, I personally feel public health would be best served by the granting of a limited, time certain exemption.

In 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger showed tremendous commitment, resolve and leadership by signing AB 2943 (Pavley) into law. The Governor has been a true champion, friend and supporter of California's autism community both with his deeds and actions. I know and trust that the Governor has the best interests of all of California's children in mind and heart as he made the serious decision to grant a time-limited exemption to California's historic mercury free vaccine law. I strongly support his decision.

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Below is text of a letter Governor Schwarzenegger sent to the chairman, president and CEO of Sanofi Pasteur.

November 1, 2006

Dave Williams
Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer
Sanofi Pasteur
Discovery Drive
Swiftwater, Pennsylvania 18370

Dear Chairman Williams,

Protecting the health and safety of Californians is one of my top priorities as Governor, which is why in 2004 I signed essential legislation aimed at ensuring that pregnant women and young children in California have access to mercury-free vaccines. The Mercury Free Act of 2004 (Pavley, Chapter 837, Statutes of 2004) restricts levels of thimerosal in vaccines administered to pregnant women and children less than 36 months of age. This law is consistent with the overall direction provided through a 1999 joint statement by the United States Public Health Service and the American Academy of Pediatrics which says, "...the Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and vaccine manufacturers agree that thimerosal-containing vaccines should be removed as soon as possible."

Due to production and/or shipment delays by your company, California is experiencing a shortfall of the only formulation of influenza vaccine that meets California's new mercury standard for children under the age of three years. Despite the existence of the Mercury Free Act of 2004 and public commitments made by your industry to remove thimerosal from vaccines, because of this delay we could lose the opportunity to protect this vulnerable population through immunization against influenza. Given the severe health threat that seasonal influenza presents, this delay could have deadly consequences.

Although you are attempting to increase production of mercury-free influenza vaccine to meet California's critical need, I am calling on you to redouble your efforts to accelerate production of thimerosal-free products and to seek or maintain FDA licensure of all influenza vaccines for use in infants, young children and pregnant women. Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter and for your continued commitment to improving public health and safety.

Sincerely,

Arnold Schwarzenegger